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AUTHOR Carmichael, Georgia; Malague, Marianne
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ABSTRACT

Conflict resolution at community colleges or other organizations requires an analysis of four situational factors: the conflict issues, the organizational setting, hierarchy and role relationships, and the personal styles of the conflicting parties. These factors yield insight into the dynamics of the conflict and provide the groundwork for ethical and productive conflict management. The identification of the issues surrounding conflicts should arise from dialogue with conflicting parties, ideally leading to the development of a shared view. Since every organization has unique rules, traditions, values, and assumptions, the organizational setting must be considered. At community colleges, for example, shared values such as the fulfillment of student goals, enhancement of learning, and support or cooperation in the workplace may provide deans with criteria for making decisions in conflict situations. While the assumption often exists that power to resolve a conflict situation lies within the formal hierarchy of an institution, at community colleges the hierarchical structure only applies within limited realms, with faculty having different roles and authority than department chairs. Finally, deans and chairs should be aware of the different approaches, or styles, that individuals take in conflict situations, including competition, collaboration, compromise, accommodation, and avoidance. Understanding the elements of conflict can help administrators adopt clear strategies for its resolution. (TGI)

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HOW TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS EFFECTIVELY

By

Georgia Carmichael
Assistant Dean, Instruction
and
Marianne Malague
Dean, Instruction

North Harris College
Houston, TX

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

Ms. Marianne Malague is Dean of Instruction at North Harris College in Houston, Texas. She has a background in nursing education, curriculum development, college administration and school-to-work initiatives. She is currently a participant in the Institute for Academic Leadership jointly sponsored by Western Metropolitan College in Australia and the National Community College Chair Academy in the USA. Ms. Malague's primary responsibility is to provide the leadership and supervision for the credit academic and career programs. She is also coordinator of a five year Title III federal government grant focused on improving student persistence and success. She has a particular interest in providing the resources to empower others to do their jobs.

Georgia Carmichael is Assistant Dean of Instruction at North Harris College in Houston, Texas. Her instructional background is in the areas of basic writing and academic support programs, and she has had additional experience in grant writing and management.

How to Solve Conflicts Effectively

A young man stands in the office doorway, his backpack in one hand and a sheet of paper partially crumpled in the other. He stares at the person sitting behind a desk strewn with budget sheets and schedule printouts. "Are you the dean?" he asks. "Are you the person I need to talk to about my geology professor?" The dean looks up, gripping her pen just a bit tighter, and steels herself for another round of student vs. faculty, or faculty vs. faculty, or faculty vs. administrator, or whatever this particular conflict may turn out to be. The student continues: "I have to change teachers. I have to get into a new class. Dr. Berman's awful. I just can't stand it. I don't know how anybody can stay in that class. I have to get into another class." And so begins another conflict scenario typical of those that deans and department chairs face on a routine basis.

While this conflict scenario may seem rather insignificant, it is fairly representative of the types of conflict that happen day in and day out and take up so much of the time and focus of community college department chairs and deans. As front-line managers, often department chairs and deans are viewed by students and faculty as the solvers of problems. The dean's office thus becomes the place that all roads lead to, at least all the roads carrying conflicts. However, most chairs and deans arrive in their positions without any formal training in mediation or conflict management techniques. By necessity, they develop seat-of-the-pants approaches to dealing with conflict situations. While many meet with great success through trial and error or through sheer talent, all could benefit by gaining an analytic perspective on conflict and by developing a coherent, strategic approach tailored for the particular conflict situations department chairs and deans regularly face.

The nature of any given conflict situation rests on four factors, as delineated by Putnam and Poole (1987): the conflict issue, the organizational setting, hierarchy and role relationships, and the personal styles of the conflicting parties. Analysis of these four factors yields insight into the interpersonal and organizational dynamics of the conflict situation. This insight then provides the groundwork for ethical and productive conflict management.

The Conflict Issue

In the above example, the dean is faced with a conflict situation, the specifics of which she may have very little knowledge of. To begin the process of conflict management, the dean first has to examine the conflict issue. The natural inclination is to assume that the issue is just as the student identified it: he can't stand Dr. Berman, and he wants to move to another class. However, if the dean accepts that the reality of the conflict issue is just as the student perceives it, then she is left with only two choices: either move the student to another class or refuse to move him. In fact, conflict issues are not always as they seem, and to take immediate action on what seems to be the issue can narrow the options for resolution. What if, in fact, the issue is actually that the student's feelings were hurt when Dr. Berman criticized his term paper, or that he received a bad grade and is afraid of what his parents will say, or that Dr. Berman requires his students to use computers and the student is afraid to do so? The process of examining the conflict issue must not be cut short, because conflict issues can be elusive and can emerge or evolve at any time.

One of the reasons that the conflict issue is rarely clear cut is that conflicting parties most often have very different views of just what they are in conflict about. For instance, in the above example, the student might claim that the issue is Dr. Berman's tyrannical behavior and blatant disrespect for the students. However, if Dr. Berman subsequently identifies the issue as being the student's rebellion against the enforcement of rigorous academic standards, then the dean is faced with two different definitions of the issue. Naming the conflict as one either of "instructional behavior" or of "academic standards" has far-reaching implications within the ensuing resolution process: the name the conflict is given can determine the questions that are asked, the criteria that are used, the policies that are invoked, and it can serve to tilt the playing field toward one party or the other. The process of defining the issue is therefore crucial to achieving a successful resolution, and a dean or department chair should not be too quick to attach a name to a given conflict issue. Instead, the definition of the issue should arise from dialogue with both conflicting parties. Ideally, such dialogue can lead to the development of a shared view of what the conflict issue is.

The Organizational Setting

Besides the conflict issue, a second factor the dean must take into account is the organizational setting, that is, the particular community college environment in which this conflict has arisen. Each organization has its own signature style, marked by particular rules, traditions, values, and assumptions. The resulting organizational climate serves as a system governing people's interactions within the organization and determines to a large extent which conflicts get aired, how they are presented, and what process is used for managing them.

The rules and norms that comprise an organization's climate are both explicit and implicit. Explicit rules include the organization's written code, its set of policies and guidelines. There are also explicit procedures for handling conflicts, such as appeals processes and grievances. When deans or department chairs are faced with a conflict situation, their first inclination is usually to appeal to these written policies and formal processes. Of course, it is a given that understanding the organization's explicit rules and procedures is essential for effective conflict management. However, it is a common assumption that there is a single right answer to any given conflict, that there are always applicable rules or policies. Based on this assumption, the work of the conflict manager then becomes one of knowing and applying the relevant rule. In reality, though, there is not a written policy for every situation, and managing a conflict is often not as clear cut as enforcing a particular rule.

Whether or not there are any applicable policies in a given situation, there are certainly implicit assumptions and values that underlie the actions of conflicting parties, and these assumptions and values arise from the cultural milieu of the conflict setting. Because community colleges share a common purpose and ancestry, they tend to have some commonalities in terms of their organizational climates. For one thing, the work of community colleges is in human development, and this mission brings with it certain values that inform how deans and department chairs approach conflict situations. Values such as fulfillment of student goals, enhancement of learning, or support and cooperation in the workplace provide a shared, although often unstated, set of criteria for making sound decisions in conflict situations.

The historical development of community colleges contributes to their characteristic organizational climate, as well. Community colleges can trace two lines of ancestry: one from public high schools and the other from universities. Characteristics of both lines are evident in the ways conflict is typically processed in the community college setting. For instance, formal conflict resolution processes, such as grade appeals, mirror those of universities. Faculty rights and responsibilities also derive more from university models than from their public school counterparts. However, public school influence can be seen in the hierarchy of management and what is often a top-down approach to conflict resolution.

Hierarchy and Roles

In the above example, the student has come to the dean's door because he intends to go over Professor Berman's head. He assumes that the power to resolve the conflict situation lies within the formal hierarchy of the college. On the face of it, this is a reasonable assumption, but accepting that assumption without examination can lead to problems. If the dean immediately assumes that the duty and/or privilege of making a decision about the conflict rests with her, then she may insert herself inappropriately into the conflict situation or even usurp someone else's authority. What if, for instance, the resolution of the conflict involves a grade change? The dean would be clearly out of line to make a decision to change the grade designated by Dr. Berman. The fact is that the hierarchical structure of a community college only applies within a limited realm. While students and even faculty and staff may carry every conflict up the hierarchy to a department chair or dean, not every conflict is appropriate for the chair or dean to act upon.

Hierarchical structures and role relationships also affect conflict management in other ways. The interdependence of roles and differences in status will invariably be major influences on how the involved parties act out the conflict. How the above student approaches the conflict situation will be determined in large part by the fact that he is in conflict with someone of higher authority. Similarly, the dean's own hierarchical role will affect how the conflicting parties voice their concerns and how they interact with each other.

Conflict Styles

The dean or department chair faced with a conflict situation must also be aware of the diversity of approaches that different people take toward conflict. Every person will have a unique orientation toward any given conflict situation. Some people will scream. Some people will run away. Some people will bang a shoe on the table. And still others will draw a flowchart. The dean or department chair needs to be prepared to recognize different conflict styles, to acknowledge each person's characteristic style, and to use this diversity of styles to the college's advantage.

Five different conflict styles, as described by Putnam and Poole (1987), comprise the range of typical orientations people take toward conflict. Competing is the most aggressive style, characterized by verbal dominance, tenacity, and use of position power. Collaborating is a similarly direct style with a less agressive stance and more of a problem-solving orientation. Compromising is a style marked by the tendency to meet half-way between the conflicting parties' positions. Accommodating is a more indirect conflict style in which differences are minimized and glossed over. Avoiding is the most indirect conflict style; people exhibiting this style simply withdraw from or deny the conflict situation.

While any given person may tend toward a particular style, there are many situational factors that affect a person's choice of style in a particular conflict.

Conflict Management Strategies

Analysis of these four factors of conflict situations--the conflict issue, organizational setting, hierarchy and roles, and conflict styles--leads to a clearer understanding of the interpersonal and organizational dynamics of conflict. In dealing with the case of the angry student vs. Dr. Berman, the dean is much better equipped to orchestrate a productive resolution process if she builds her conflict management strategies upon this analytical foundation.

Strategies and guidelines can be derived from the analysis of each of the four factors. If the dean understands the nature of conflict issues, that they are emergent and changing, then she will put great emphasis upon the dialogue that occurs with the conflicting parties. She will be patient. She will listen more than talk. She will have more questions than answers. She will nudge and prod and guide the conflicting parties to develop a shared view of the issue. If the dean understands the organizational setting of the college, then she will be cognizant of the rules that guide her decision-making. She will certainly act in accordance with formal policies and procedures, but she will also know that there are many other implicit rules by which she must abide. She will consciously focus on the values underlying the mission of the organization, and she will use those values as decision-making criteria. If the dean understands the college's hierarchy and role relationships, she will be wary of taking control of any particular conflict situation that is brought to her. She will exert her hierarchical authority only within its limits. She will also take into account differences in status and the dynamics of her own position of power within the dispute. Finally, if the dean understands the different ways that people approach conflict, then she will avoid expecting everyone to speak the same conflict language. She will acknowledge that one person's crying may be as legitimate as another person's dry-eyed logic. She will use this diversity of personal styles as a resource, and she will view conflict as a creative opportunity.

Overall, this analysis leads to the adoption of a facilitative rather than an authoritative stance toward conflict management. While researchers have found that managers confronted with conflict situations most often employ more authoritative, controlling strategies, they have also found that it is the less controlling, facilitative strategies that lead to more durable and effective resolutions (Karambayya and Brett, 1994). Interestingly, Karambayya and Brett also found that managers seem to learn this through experience: experienced managers tend to employ facilitative strategies more often than do inexperienced managers, who tend to rely heavily on autocratic strategies. Experience teaches many valuable lessons, and this is one from which deans and department chairs can well learn.

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